

DABBING IN COLLEGE BROADCASTING*

Presented with the compliments of
THE NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION BY RADIO
1201 Sixteenth Street Northwest
Washington, D. C.

By mischance not having received a copy of the program for this afternoon, I am at a loss to know the exact subject of my talk, also the subjects of the other talks to be given this session in order that I might know just how I should fit into the scheme of things. I trust that my comments will not however be a mere repetition of what every one else has said. Yet I suspect that most of us have had very similar experiences; the only object in reporting them being the hope that the weight of the sum total of them will someday be of sufficient pressure to bring about changes.

For the past four years Western State Teachers College has had two fifteen-minute broadcasts per week, plus one half hour Sunday twice a month, over the local commercial station which has a service radius of about one hundred miles. The station has been a part of the Michigan network, and is to be a part of the NBC this year. My own experience with the broadcasts has been limited to the past two years and has been a responsibility added to my already existing full-time job.

My most trying experiences have been with attitudes of skepticism or condescension from four different angles. In mentioning these, I do so because these are the points at which we need most help. Let me hasten to add, however, that actually these were overshadowed by the response which we received from our listening audience and by the cooperation and hard work of faculty members and outsiders asked to participate. Some of the fifteen-minute roundtables broadcast required, according to reports, from fifteen to twenty-five hours preparation on the part of the participants.

In the first place, many faculty people even yet look upon radio programs as being primarily cheap and vulgar having about the same relation to the listening audience as the penny tabloids have to the newspaper reading public. A few entertain for the radio such contempt that they will not even have receiving sets in their

*An address by Dr. William McKinley Robinson, Director, Western's Radio Hour, Western State Teachers College, Kalamazoo, Michigan, before the Annual Convention of the National Association of Educational Broadcasters, Iowa City, Iowa, September 10, 1935.

homes. However, this number grows smaller all the while. In casual conversation with almost any member of the faculty, one finds that they spend a considerable numbers of hours listening to the radio--many more than they commonly admit--some having pet programs which they hesitate to forego for social engagements. I grow quite impatient with this attitude, and I have come to believe that it furnishes the first point of attack in any program of college or university broadcasting. We would-be highbrows have devoted too much time to criticism of the weaknesses of the radio and too little time to articulate appreciation of and constructive suggestions for the best the radio has to offer.

In the second place, it seems difficult to convince the faculty that there is any place for the local radio station except for local advertising and local athletics. They will grant that there is a place for local newspapers, but they fail to grant similar justification for the local broadcasting station. It takes continual emphasis upon this point to get them to prepare their radio programs in terms of the needs and interests of Southwestern Michigan which is largely rural. They much prefer scholarly academic generalizations requiring from fifteen to thirty minutes to read. There are times when I am tempted to think that such is the professorial turn of mind so why not accept that fact and leave broadcasting to those with a better listening audience consciousness. But being one who believes firmly that publicly-owned and controled institutions of higher learning have an obligation just as surely to their service area as to campus students, I return again to stress upon the rural audience of Southwestern Michigan. Just as surely as elementary and high school teachers are expected to learn the technics of visual and health education, college and university professors should master new technics of presenting their subject-matter.

Our programs have been devoted largely to subjects of local interest or of general interest localized in interpretation or personalities. Prior to the referendum on county reorganization, we had a series of programs on local government. At the time of the setting up of county consumer councils, we had two series on consumer problems. This year our state celebrates its centennial, and so we have been having series on state historical events. Last spring one series featured interesting auto drives thruout this area with discussion of various geological or biological or literary or historic points of interest noted. Nor have we neglected the literary and aesthetic interests. Of course our program has not been devoted exclusively to the local, not more than is our newspaper, the Kalamazoo Gazette.

The third in our series of skepticisms with which we must contend, is that I have great difficulty in convincing the faculty members that any one is listening. It is difficult to put any personality into a talk when one can not envision listeners; particularly is it difficult to maintain an easy conversational style even when one is participating in a round table. I post on the faculty bulletin board just before the end of each term--which, incidentally, is just before beginning to line up the program for the next twelve week period--a number of letters of commendation and requests for copies of programs plus a statement of the total number of copies of talks for which there have been requests. During the past year 1,000 copies were sent out. When I hear comments from out in the field on our programs, I take pains to spread the word about. We have had a few listening groups organized, concerning which notices are posted. And yet I find it difficult to get faculty members to envision listeners. They are accustomed to and dependent upon the stimulation of a visable audience.

In the fourth place, left until last purposely, is the attitude of condescension on the part of the management of the broadcasting station. Each fall after they have their season's program quite well signed up, they call us to remind us that

they will be very glad to give us some time. The whole manner is one of granting us a favor, never for a second admitting to us that there is a federal check up on the types of their programs before a renewal is granted of their broadcasting license. Apparently they think that we are too stupid or too preoccupied to know anything of the regulations under which they work and unconscious of their pride in announcing following our broadcast that "this program was brought to the air as a WKZO contribution to public service." And I must admit that when faculty members are too condescending about the whole matter, I remind them in much the same manner as the station management assumes with me, that our minutes on the air have great commercial value and since they are giving us the time so generously it behooves us to be very humble and grateful.

To be sure, all of the more desirable hours have been taken by their commercial paying programs. We are given occasionally two choices of time, but usually there is no choice. We are assured that the time given us is subject to change at any time within a few hours notice, and that notwithstanding the fact that we mail out and otherwise distribute some five thousand printed programs for each twelve-week period. I dare say we give their station the most consistently wide distribution of advertising of anyone using it. They have never even so much as expressed the slightest gratitude for that fact, altho we have always given them copies of the program and occasionally a statement of their distribution. In all fairness to them I am glad to state that they have never shifted our time of program except between college terms. That statement of course does not cover the programs which have been cut off altogether with notice of only an hour or so because of a football or baseball game. There is nothing that I can say that would add one whit to the expression of indignation that all educational broadcasting directors experience because of those games. I merely join in the chorus of irritation. Another point which I must in all fairness make to the station management is that they have tried

to reserve the same hour--1 PM--thruout the week for the use of various educational and civic organizations in this area. Consequently, all of us profit or suffer by the publicity of any of us.

We have contended with our faculty that one justification of local stations is the personal acquaintance or knowledge of the speaker held by many of the listeners. Any publicity value accruing to the college must come from the high quality of the programs using faculty members personally known to many of the listeners. And so we have been very anxious that the voices of our people seem as natural as possible. Any one at all familiar with broadcasting knows that to accomplish this result entails auditions. There we were up against two stone walls: faculty members accustomed to speaking all the while had no misgivings as to their ability to speak in public and the radio station people scoffed at the idea. But when wives at home did not recognize the voices of their own husbands, faculty members were gradually won over. In consequence of our insistence upon auditions, we learned indirectly that even men at the station were convinced of their worth to the point that some of their employees had auditions. But the station authorities still maintained an attitude of indifference which discouraged our people when they went in for rehearsals. However, we still urge auditions for anyone who has not had previous experience. The point I am trying to emphasize is this; after the station has fulfilled its obligation by granting us time, they do not care at all whether or not our programs are successful. Their duty is done, their fifteen to thirty minutes credited, and they are anxious that it entail a minimum of annoyance to them.

As a teacher-training institution, we have interest in the possibilities of broadcasting for the schools of our area. Knowing something of the history of such experiments and of the general skepticism of the possibilities in that field, far be it from me to undertake such an experiment without a far more wholehearted support than educational broadcasting now enjoys on the part of our faculty and local stations

Scanned from the National Association of Educational Broadcasters Records
at the Wisconsin Historical Society as part of
"Unlocking the Airwaves: Revitalizing an Early Public and Educational Radio Collection."



A collaboration among the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities,
University of Wisconsin-Madison Department of Communication Arts,
and Wisconsin Historical Society.

Supported by a Humanities Collections and Reference Resources grant from
the National Endowment for the Humanities



WISCONSIN
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY



WISCONSIN
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON



Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication/collection do not necessarily reflect those of the
National Endowment for the Humanities.